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Allabadi, Fadwa

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# Controversy

## Secular and Islamist Women in Palestinian Society

Fadwa Allabadi

AL-QUDS UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on the multilayered changes in the lives of Palestinian women over the years of the first and second Intifadas. On the one hand, women have become far more actively involved in politics, with a Women's Charter being drafted and legislation concerning women's rights being put on the political agenda. At the same time, the political shift from a Fatah- to a Hamas-dominated government has shifted understandings of whether the state should be secular or Islamist. Paradoxical developments by which Hamas has, on the one hand, fostered women's education and job training opportunities, but, on the other, insisted on women's subordinate legal status, are reflected within the Islamist women's movement. The article discusses the decline in power of the left-ist and secular political forces, and the resulting political conflicts between the earlier secular feminist movement and the more recent 'Islamist feminism'.

**KEY WORDS** Fatah ♦ Hamas ♦ Intifada ♦ Islamist feminism ♦ secular feminism ♦ women's rights

### INTRODUCTION

Revolutionary changes have taken place in the lives of Palestinian women over the past three decades. These changes have dramatically altered female status and aspects of the gender order, and have been reflected in the new wave of women's and feminist movements. The Palestinian women's movement, which was launched in early 1978, consists of a number of distinct types of organizations, including a general union, committees affiliated to political parties, independent women's NGOs, charitable societies and women's studies and research centres. Linked

through various forms of coordination, these different organizations are all placed within the framework of a Palestinian women's movement, with the specific aim of furthering women's rights within the context of Palestinian politics. This political context is further characterized not only by the change of power from Fatah to Hamas, but, partly in consequence of this, by a shifting – and indeterminate – climate regarding the model of state/religious relations to be adopted.

In addition to the General Union of Palestinian Women (GUPW), which was established in 1965 as a body within the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), a new form of women's organization emerged in the late 1970s, known as the women's committees (mass-based women's organizations). The initial goal of the women's committees was to mobilize the mass of Palestinian women around the dual issues of national rights and women's rights. These committees are affiliated to the various Palestinian factions and political parties. Committees for social work are affiliated to Fatah. The Palestinian Federation of Women's Action Committees (PFWAC) currently consists of two different factions: one is affiliated to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); the other to the Palestine Democratic Union (Al-Ittihad al-Dimuqrati al-Filastini, generally known as the FIDA). The Union of Palestinian Women's Committees (UPWC) is affiliated to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP); the Union of Palestinian Working Women's Committees is affiliated to the Palestinian People's Party and Palestinian Union of Women. Most of these committees are socialist in their political orientation. In the post-Oslo period,<sup>1</sup> the women's committees have developed various programmes, such as running a domestic violence hotline, and have been actively campaigning on issues of violence against women, as well as working on issues of democracy and representation.

Besides the women's committees, women's research centres and NGOs, another form of women's organization was established in the early 1990s to meet new needs identified by independent women scholars. These organizations have different goals. Together with the women's committees, they are members of the Women's Affairs Technical Committee, which serves as a coordinating and lobbying network, with its main work focused on the promotion of democracy and women's political participation, lobbying/networking, training and establishing a national government body for women. Among these are the Women's Studies Centre and the Women's Centre for Legal Aid and Counselling (WCLAC), providing legal aid services, social work and health advocacy, training and lobbying. The Women's Affairs Centre in Gaza conducts research on women's issues, runs video and writing courses, provides training and a development clinic and organizes public events. All these committees and centres have branches in all the main cities of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and together constitute the secular women's movement in Palestine.

The global escalation in Islamic fundamentalism in the early 1990s has led to the emergence of a new brand of feminism, which can be called Islamic feminism. A number of women's Islamic organizations affiliated with Hamas and Islamic Jihad were launched, and have attracted legions of women followers of Islam, giving them control over Hamas-funded educational and job-training programmes, and encouraging women to finish school and attend university, yet at the same time restricting their legal rights to those laid out in the Qur'an. Cheryl Rubenberg describes this movement as one in which Palestinian Muslim women find a precedent for a strong Muslim woman in the Qur'an and teachings of Muhammad, and reject current conservative attitudes about women as false notions concocted by men attempting to manipulate history and the teachings of Islam (Rubenberg, 2001). These Islamic groups or 'Islamic feminists' are not part of the secular Palestinian women's movement, but they are involved in several programmes together with the secular women's groups, such as those related to women's education, health and poverty.

#### THE PROBLEMS CONFRONTING THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The modern Palestinian feminist movement identifies the Israeli occupation, and the illegal Wall erected by the Israelis,<sup>2</sup> as the main cause of the many problems that face women and their society, including poverty, illiteracy, lack of human rights and unemployment. The 'Apartheid Wall' has exacerbated an already dire situation. Most women in Palestinian society already faced obstacles to obtaining their social and economic rights as full citizens. With the Wall, women have become more vulnerable, marginalized and disenfranchised. The construction of the Wall, together with the Israeli checkpoints, has had a serious socioeconomic impact on many Palestinians' lives, especially those of women and children. The unemployment and poverty created by constructing the Wall on agricultural land and restricting residents' movements have impacted heavily on women's socioeconomic status. All aspects of their social lives are affected, and of the 50 percent of the population that live below the poverty line, most are women.

Women have largely been excluded from the public sphere of employment, as they have lost access to work in Jerusalem and in Israeli factories. Yet many women have become the only breadwinner in their families as they are forced out of their protected domestic domain to seek employment to sustain their families, while their unemployed husbands stay at home. Women have also lost access to health care and hospitals; pregnant women have given birth at checkpoints because they are not allowed to pass through to go to hospital, and the many delays result in pregnant

women having miscarriages or stillborn infants, or dying in childbirth. Many female students have had to drop out of high school and college due to the difficulties in getting to their educational institutions.

Furthermore, the occupation brings another major problem for women: sexual assault. Many of them have been assaulted by Israeli soldiers while in jail as a form of retribution, punishment, humiliation, and even as a means of eliciting information. Although we live in a permanent emergency situation (with constant threat of Israeli reinvasions), there is no unity in the women's movement. Owing to the fragmentation of politics as well as the accompanying militarization of society, the movement has experienced several setbacks.

The second issue is the confrontation with fundamentalism, in particular Hamas, which has exploded over the last 15 years, frustrating secular women who have worked in politics for decades and who now find many young women turning to a starkly different Islamic vision of empowerment and equality. The promotion of secularism is therefore an important vehicle to protect society from religion's intervention in people's lives, especially in the face of religion's increasing access to power. Women's rights have become trampled under a new form of patriarchal Islamic fundamentalism that has swept through the nation, enforcing the wearing of the traditional Islamic dress, the *hijab*. The reasons behind this trend are for some not only an expression of their Islamic faith, but also serve as a symbol of nationalist identity; however, for others, the *hijab* is a mark of a new kind of feminism known as Islamic feminism. Jamila Al-Shanti (the political visionary in the party's female ranks, and third ranking candidate on the national electoral list of Hamas) talks of Hamas using an interpretation of Islam to push back the boundaries for women, and draw them more into employment and social activity of all kinds. 'Hamas will scrap many of the traditions. People think that Islamic law is about being veiled and closed and staying at home – but that's wrong. A woman can go out veiled and do all kinds of work without any problem.' She continues: 'We will bring back Islamic thought and heritage through the media and through education. These people will come to understand their culture. But we will not seize their freedoms from them' (quoted in Johnston, 2006). In fact, the majority of Palestinians are Muslims, and many will be content with talk of enhancing the influence of Islam. And particularly in more conservative Gaza, Hamas is moving very much with the prevailing social grain. These trends, however, affect secular feminists and their struggle to achieve women's rights.

The third issue confronting the women's movement is their need to challenge men's power in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) and the depopulation of women in the public arena. The deprecation of women's role in the public sphere is evident in several different dimensions. Islamic groups have utilized an Islamist rhetoric that has negatively

depicted the role of women in the public sphere, and this has been done not only by Islamic groups, but also by men in general. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, patriarchal elements in the society began to attack women's political involvement and their presence on the streets by restoring disciplinary practices grounded in customary and traditional norms and taboos. Under the guise of protecting girls and women from public harm and masculine assaults, male relatives increasingly intervened in women's involvement in politics and started to restrict their movement. Many traditional values were revived, such as the traditional attitude towards women being dishonoured by participating in the struggle against occupation, which until this time had been condoned (Heiberg, 1993). Moreover, this patriarchal view towards women moving freely in the streets unaccompanied by men constituted a threat to a woman's sexual freedom, possibly leading her to be perceived as a 'loose' woman.

Palestinian male nationalists have also endeavoured to rid the political arena of women. This was already happening in the first administration of the Palestinian Authority in which there was only one female minister and one female under-secretary. Women were appointed in a few other high positions, such as general director and director positions. This pattern of male exclusivity in Palestinian governance has been repeated in successive cabinets until the most recent cabinet that formed after the conflict with Hamas over Gaza in 2007, with only three women ministers. What this reveals is that women have been excluded from participation in the government structure and from building their future state. Furthermore, Palestinian women were also excluded from the crucial stages of the peace process, including the Oslo and Cairo agreements. As a result, the outcomes of the Oslo Accords were designed by men and neglected women's specific concerns.

Additionally, the PNA has deployed various laws and regulations that disenfranchise women even more, such as the passport law, which was issued in late 1995 and was made in line with the law of other Arab and Middle Eastern countries. This law requires that a woman receive permission or a signature from her male 'guardian' (i.e. her husband, father or elder brother) on her passport application. Another regulation aimed at women stated that 'women and girls who want to obtain a driving licence must be accompanied by a male guardian during the practical lessons'. However, the women's movement has successfully countered both decisions. Another issue challenged by the women's movement is the announcement by the Mufti of Palestine encouraging early marriage and polygamy. He advocated these two practices on the grounds that they could bring about a cessation of the anticipated adultery and sin that might result once the political struggle against the Israeli occupation has ended. The women's movement opposed this issue and called for an amendment of the personal status law to raise the age of marriage and to prohibit polygamy.

In large part, I believe that this disenfranchisement of women has resulted from the Palestinian move from nationalist resistance to statehood. In an international context where affairs of state are primarily the domain of men, this move necessitated the 'defeminization' of the Palestinian political leadership. It appears that the very strength of Palestinian women's presence in the nationalist public sphere threatened the order that, in the eyes of men, required a systematic reassertion of male power.

## ISLAMIZATION OF PALESTINIAN SOCIETY

Islam as a religion is significant not only in social and economic realms, but in that it also has an important political message for the liberation and independence of Palestine. The correlation of nationalism with Islamism forms the pivot of their loyalty to their state for most Palestinians who participate in the national resistance movement. The concept of (Arab) nationalism unifies the Arab world: people feel they are united by the ties of blood, history, language and shared interests, and aspire to a future political united entity that is socially and culturally modern and progressive. Islam represents Arabic culture and has been spread by the Arabs throughout a large part of the world and binds Muslims together in the belief in God and his Messenger. So it is understandable that Islam as a religion is thought to be the defining feature of Arab nationalism.

Within the Palestinian context, nationalism is a concept aligned to Islam as both share a common identity, and many citizens are increasingly asserting that identity in the face of colonization. This gives a sense of the relationship between religion and politics, and many in Palestinian society, particularly those participating in the national resistance movement, do believe their loyalty to Islam to be a part of their devotion to their nation.

Two decades prior to the Oslo Accords, Palestinian society appears to have been more secular. It also seems that women have tended to be more secular than men. This certainly was one of my observations in the study I conducted with a sample of women in the winter of 1996: the majority of the respondents were believers, but not all were practising, while their husbands or other male family members were highly committed to Islam. Some of the male relatives of those women that expressed a commitment to secularism also identified themselves as strong believers and practitioners. Heiberg (1993) has also observed that women tend to be more secular than men, and men more religiously activist than women. Among women, there is a slight decrease in the number of observant Muslims and a corresponding increase in the degree of secularization among those under 50 years of age. However, the proportion of women who profess sentiments linked to political Islam seems to remain fairly steady over the generations.

Although not all nationalists or political activists are dedicated to Islam, there is a range of religiosity from the secular to the devoutly religious. Some political activists are religious in both belief and practice, indicated by religious observance associated with a political religious identity. For others, religion has a more political significance. Secular activists, on the other hand, express only political and national identity, and have never proclaimed any religious political values; these are now very much a minority group. This has come about because Palestinians were in general disappointed with the Oslo Accords, and this bred frustration among the nationalists in general and among women in particular. Because the peace agreements were not implemented in accordance with accepted legal frameworks and under the auspices of neutral third parties, the 'peace process' was quickly seen to be a re-entrenchment of the Israeli colonialism and oppression that the Palestinians suffered rather than putting an end to them. As a result, many secular activists suspended their political activities and tended to become more religious.

Before the Oslo Accords, the trend towards secularization had already suffered a sudden reversal in 1988, in the second year of the Intifada. It seems that secularization has been floundering ever since and experienced further setbacks since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada (second Intifada) in 2001. One significant point is that secularism and leftist politics declined overall and the number of women interested in politics decreased. This is because the frustration at the failure of the peace talks, as mentioned earlier, caused the number of women mobilized in the political parties to decline, and many women also gave up their activities in grassroots organizations. As a result, the women's movement joined the second Intifada without the mass-based women's organizations of the first Intifada. As social-political conditions had radically changed, and women's political participation decreased, and together with the restrictions imposed by Islamic fundamentalism, their enthusiasm and hope had waned.

I believe that the deterioration of secularism and leftist politics was inevitable given that the regression of the revolution facilitated a resurgence of reactionary power. Here I use 'reactionary' to describe patriarchal power, not only that of the right wing or the religious factions, but also of the secularists and leftists who become reactionary when they lost their revolutionary characteristics, as happened in the PLO and the PNA during and after the second Intifada. As the politics of the Intifada became more difficult, and the goals of national independence and statehood grew more distant, so the people became more frustrated. I argue that the undermining of the Palestinian revolution was the main factor in the growth of a reactionary front (Islamic groups) and the decrease in revolutionary zeal, and explains why the secularist left were receding and being overtaken by flourishing Islamic political groups.



Since the Oslo Accords, a lack of ideas and organizational paralysis have marked left-wing politics, as its leadership lost the ability to mobilize people and solve their problems, and failed to introduce an alternative vision for the new era. Nor did the peace process provide for the legitimate right to self-determination, the full establishment of a Palestinian state or the right of refugees to return. Frustration at the first Intifada, and the failure of the Palestinian political leaders to achieve progress in the peace process gave rise to disillusionment among the Palestinian people. Additionally, these factors caused them to turn away from a materialist and social solution and look instead to the spiritual life, expressing a pious hope that metaphysical powers might come and rescue them. This situation, however, also paved the road for the Islamic political groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad to flourish and to become the most attractive political factions for Palestinians in general and for ordinary people in particular.

#### A NEW AGENDA FOR THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

When the Oslo Accords, also known as the 'Declaration of Principles', were signed in September 1993, Palestinian women had drafted and approved a 'Document of Principles on Women's Legal Status', also called the 'Women's Charter' or 'Women's Declaration of Principles'. They aimed to draw up a women's Bill of Rights for the autonomous period and the independent state, based on the International Bill of Human Rights and the UN CEDAW.<sup>3</sup>

The Charter has served as a basic document for the women's movement strategy and action plan, particularly for those groups affiliated to Fatah and to the left-wing factions. They also use it in their lobbying and networking within the Palestinian parliament, the Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), to change the legislation relating to women. Secular members of the PLC and other NGOs such as the labour movement support the Charter. Indeed, women have succeeded in achieving the right to be elected to governing bodies. Within the past decade, Palestinian women have played a significant role in the 1996 and 2006 national elections. They succeeded, in 2005, in achieving a legally recognized quota for women of 20 percent for both the legislative and municipal elections. Two seats per local council were set aside for women. The quota system has proven to be an important means of increasing women's representation not only in parliament but also in the local councils. It has also given the political parties an incentive to recruit more women into their ranks, ultimately gaining recognition for a new quota system geared to correct historical gender imbalances in their society.

The quota system guarantees women a greater level of participation in political life at both the local and parliamentary levels. A marked trend,

however, is the increased participation of Islamist women in the elections, in addition to secular women, not only as voters, but also as candidates. The number of elected women representatives has increased overall. In the first legislative elections in January 1996, women formed 42 percent of the electorate. However, they made up only 4 percent of the 688 candidates and won only five seats of the 88 seats on the new Legislative Council. In the 2006 elections, women accounted for 85 of the 728 candidates on national and district lists and won 22 percent of the seats on the Legislative Council.

#### THE DEBATE BETWEEN SECULARIST AND ISLAMIST FEMINISM

Palestinian women are beset by complexity and contradiction as secular and Islamist perspectives overlap and impact on their attitudes towards state structures (Jacoby, 1996). One area considered crucial by Palestinian decision-makers is the enactment of legislation capable of achieving the declared national goal of improving the legal status of Palestinians in general and of women in particular. Debates among Palestinian women have focused on the high stakes for women in the design of the postcolonial state, which will have critical impact on women's public and private lives. The fact is that Palestinian women are wary of an expected post-independence collaboration between the national state, patriarchy and the religious sector. They are gravely concerned about ideology and its impact on the legal system through personal status laws (Graham Brown, 1991), and in particular the patriarchal system, which thrived under the colonial powers and continues to permeate state ideology, policy and all social spheres throughout the Middle East to this day. This has led the women's movement to call for an unbiased legal system that considers women on an equal basis with men, particularly as regards the personal status law. At the same time, the Palestinian women's movement claims the right to a political life equal to men through formal political structures, whether at governmental or parliamentary level (WCLAC, 1995).

The question of legislation regarding women and the family has sparked controversy. Nira Yuval-Davis (1993) suggests that 'the construction by the state of relationships in the private domain, namely, marriage and the family, is what has determined women's status as citizens within the public domain'. Islamic women joined with secular women in their attempts to improve women's legal status and social positions, but they disagreed on changing several articles in the personal status law. In this context, the issue of personal status created controversy between women's groups, which highlighted the ideological divisions between secularists and religious women within Palestinian feminism. The secularists called

for unbiased legislation. They demanded an alternative civil personal law to the Shari'a-based personal status law, while the Islamist women insist on Shari'a as divine law.

Some Muslim feminists suggested modifications to Shari'a law (Hale, 1997), and, in their belief in the possibility of gender equality and minority rights within an Islamic reformist framework, proposed a compromise solution, such as a progressive interpretation of Islamic law in a manner more appropriate to the modern age. Intisar Al-Wazir (Um Jihad), minister of social affairs in the first Palestinian cabinet in 1996, was unwilling to provoke a dispute with the PNA or show antagonism to Islamic groups, and emphasized that 'we must work to include women's rights in the Palestinian constitution, in a way that will not clash with Islamic law' (*The Economist*, 1994: 41). In some ways, she approved of Shari'a law, and her attitude has been supported by Palestinian lawyer Hanan Bakri, who points out that replacing Shari'a by a civil code for personal status would create a major crisis (*The Economist*, 1994).

Other Islamic women rejected any amendments and emphasized that Islam must be at the core of women's lives. They also stated that patriarchy is embodied in Arab customs, not in Islam, and so called for an end to Arab patriarchy. The secularists, however, rejected the consolidation of the Shari'a law, as it gives patriarchal authority more power over the private sphere of Palestinian civil society. Instead, they argued for a platform of secular and legal rights for women to be decided in the PLC.

In many Arab societies, as in Palestine, women lobby the state for a secular family code to free them from the discriminatory Shari'a law. The right to initiate divorce and the right to maintain custody are still rights that only men possess, while one male witness remains equivalent to two females (a practice that rests on the assumption that men are more rational than women). Secular women called for an amendment to the marriage law to make divorce equally available to women. In Palestinian state legislation, religion and customary law circumscribe women's citizenship rights. While no different from other Middle Eastern states, where in some contexts 'gendered citizenship inequities result from the articulation and conflation of gender discourses of family and religion by the state' (Joseph, 1996), the situation regarding Palestinian women is further complicated by the nation's history of oppression and occupation.

Inheritance is another important issue: Islam grants women the right to inheritance but not in a manner equal to men. The Islamist women argue that the religious distinction between a man and a woman is because the man has a financial responsibility to his family, while the woman is not expected to contribute financially. The problem is that most women have not even received the half portion to which they were entitled; while some women would never even claim their right to an inheritance. Secular women insist on changing this law because it discriminates against women.

They demand that the inheritance be divided equally between daughters and sons.

Shari'a law also discriminates against women in the case of child custody. A woman can maintain custody of her children until the age of 10, and then the father is responsible for them. Both secular and Islamist women have opposed this law, as they believe that no one can look after children as well as a mother. Only in one aspect do religious women agree with the law, namely if a divorced or widowed woman remarries then she cannot keep her children. They have called for an amendment to the law to extend a woman's custody of her children until adulthood.

The concept of freedom of movement is another issue raised by secular women; they oppose any restriction to women's mobility. However, most Islamist women believe that women should have their husband's permission to travel and unmarried women the permission of their male guardians (fathers, brothers, grandfathers or uncles). According to the Palestinian passport law, mentioned earlier, when a widespread debate on this issue ensued throughout the country, Islamist women supported the law wholeheartedly. In their words, 'it is the man's obligation to protect his female relatives according to our religion and we must respect this'. However, the secular women opposed this law and described it as reactionary and discriminating against women. In support of their view, they provided instances proving that this law oppresses women and deprives them of a basic right.

The approach of Islamist feminists is an attempt to transform past 'tradition' into a 'modern' new language to make the religious laws and doctrine accord with women's demands for liberty and equality in the present. That is to say, they call on Islam to be a more women-friendly and gender-egalitarian religion. For example, the PLC's Hamas-led Women's Affairs Committee has been making relentless efforts to guarantee women's rights in accordance with the people's heritage of traditions and the relevant laws. Prior to taking power, Hamas as a group used to hold meetings and training sessions for women from all sectors, on issues such as violence against women, inheritance and divorce (Almeghari, 2007).

## SECULAR AND ISLAMIST WOMEN IN THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS

In 1996, women expressed great joy at practising the right of suffrage for the first time. Their activities were extraordinary, indicating that when the national question takes precedence, female consciousness can be transformed into feminism and nationalism. Patriarchal and Muslim societies believe in gender differences, yet it seems that Palestine women's attitudes and behaviour during the national elections for president and the

Legislative Council in 1996 and 2006 challenged this concept of sexual difference. Regardless of their beliefs, women were enthusiastic about participating in the national elections. They played the same role as men did, encouraging each other to sign onto the electoral register, distributing pamphlets and election forms, and organizing rallies. Furthermore, they were involved in campaigning for candidates of both sexes.

Palestinian women were eager to elect women candidates to represent them on the PLC; however, they were dissatisfied with the limited number of women candidates. They were not interested merely in suffrage, but also in equal representation in parliament. During the campaigns in both national elections, many women expressed their views relating to women's right to vote. One woman commented: 'a few women candidates in the Legislative Council is not enough, we also want more women members in the Cabinet' (interview, see Allabadi, 1998: 207).

In the first elections of 1996, Hamas and other religious factions boycotted the elections but they did not prevent their members and supporters from voting. Accordingly, some Islamist women participated in the election campaigns and rallies, trying to influence the audience with an approach that advocated the Islamic view. One of those women said: 'We already have Islam as the best legal system, which grants women all rights. If the PNA implements Islamic regulations and doctrine we will be fine' (interview, see Allabadi, 1998: 207). Since the first national elections in 1996, it has become obvious that many women in Palestinian society have a strong commitment to the Islamic faith. It was inspiring to see women as religious actors defining Islam in theory and practice. On the theoretical level, this has led many women to think of the possibility of struggle within Islam and to feel compelled to change and improve women's roles and rights within an Islamic framework. They believe that women can develop democracy using the Islamist feminist approach of reinterpreting the Qur'an and Sunna. This trend of 'Islamic feminism' in many Islamic countries, as Nayereh Tohidi notes, 'emerges primarily among highly educated, middle-class women who are unwilling to break away from their religious orientation, and hold Islam as a significant component of their cultural and national identity' (Tohidi, 2002).

In the first national elections, the argument was between secular feminists and men who wanted to protect their monopoly on political and social power. Ten years later, in the second national elections in 2006, the debate turned to one between secular women and Islamist women who wanted to share political power without changing the traditional role of women in the family (Cambanis, 2006).

Some issues united women across the secular-religious divide, particularly during the municipal and local council elections in 2004 and 2005 and in the national elections of 2006 as well. Each candidate from the different groups campaigned on a platform prioritizing women's issues,

promising to improve educational and job opportunities for women. But while the election agenda of some women candidates advocated the Palestinian women's movement programme for secularization of personal status law as a key to emancipation and equal citizenship for women, the Islamist women called for a solution within the Islamic context, calling for the reinterpretation of the Qur'an from a women's perspective. In other words, the debates that emerged prior to and during the election campaigns tended to highlight the ideological divisions between secular and religious Palestinian feminists.

Hence, Islamic women's involvement in the reform process within the women's movement in Palestine is in question. I argue that their involvement in politics is an attempt to legitimize the state's gender policy. In other words, Islamic feminism works with the political system of Hamas, which secularist women claim restricts personal freedom. Islamic feminism legitimizes this system, and ignores the repressive contexts of the social and political climate in Palestine. One Hamas politician, newly elected in 2006, called for a new law to make all Palestinian women wear headscarves and to make the segregation of boys and girls obligatory in schools. Several leaders of Islamic groups have talked about making Shari'a the only source of all future legislation.

As a final point, I would say that Palestinian women candidates in all successive elections have been influenced by their political party affiliation. For instance, Islamist women affiliated with Hamas had a strong and well-funded organization with regional political Islamic support. Women candidates who were affiliated with Fatah gained power because Fatah is the mainstream political party in the PNA; while other women candidates affiliated with leftist parties, such as the People's Party, the Democratic Front and the Popular Front, lost the strong political support they had enjoyed when world socialist parties flourished.

## THE SECULAR WOMEN'S AGENDA IN THE 2006 ELECTIONS

Secular Palestinian women's groups who ran for office in the 2006 PLC elections re-evaluated the policies of social, economic and political development programmes offered to women, in order to delineate their election programmes and to raise the awareness of policy-makers. Their agenda is based on the struggle for gender equality in issues ranging from women's access to employment, education and representation in national and local government, economic development and establishment of day-care facilities, to peace activism and struggles against domestic violence. Lobbying for the increased power of women in the public sphere is at the heart of the secular agenda. All candidates from secular women's groups

shared a general programme that emphasized the participation of women in decision-making, focusing on defending democracy, protecting the environment and on agriculture, education and health; and then they had specific practical demands that reflected the needs of the women and communities they were running to represent (Miller, 2005).

All secular women's groups' projects focus on enhancing the role of women in leadership positions throughout Palestinian society. This was remarkable during both the municipal elections of 2004 and 2005 and the PLC elections in 1996 and 2006. Since then, women's groups have regained their position, collaborating with other civil society organizations and enhancing women's roles in the political parties. They have played a significant role in constructing platforms and policies within their political parties.

The two most controversial points of contention, however, and which differentiate secular agendas from more religious ones, are the attack on the Shari'a personal status laws and the appeal to universal human rights. The 'application' of Shari'a laws through the jurisdiction of religious courts in all matters of personal status has been challenged by secular feminists attempting to extricate religious influence from state policy (Jacoby, 1996).

#### THE ISLAMIST WOMEN'S AGENDA ATTRACTS WOMEN

Muslim feminists are intent on upholding Shari'a. Even though agreeing with certain amendments on the personal status law, their struggle is to ensure proper implementation of Shari'a. They also focus on adequate levels of education so that women are aware of their legal rights. Islamist feminism in Palestine is the same as other Islamist feminisms in the Middle East. They construct their discourse on gender by trying to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity and to reconcile two sets of principles: the traditional and patriarchal religious conception of women's nature, role and rights, and the new modern understanding of Muslim women's social and political roles (Tohidi, 2002).

In 1999, Hamas admitted for the first time that women were oppressed and that they had reason to struggle against discrimination and sexism. Jamila Al-Shanti, a professor of philosophy at the Islamic University, who headed the list of Hamas women candidates in the 2006 elections, told *The Guardian* that Hamas women needed to tackle discrimination. 'Our first job is to correct this because this is not Islam', Shanti said. 'We are going to show that women are not secondary, they are equal to men. Discrimination is not from Islam, it is from tradition. It may not be easy. Men may not agree' (Cambanis, 2006).

Hamas, networking through the mosques and their social services, have made deep inroads into Palestinian society. In the elections of 2006, the

Hamas female candidates assumed the mantle of women's rights. Their invitation to women to attend religious education inside mosques was welcomed by the strongly traditional society, where war has decimated people's psychological well-being, especially women and children. It was a chance for women to get out of their homes to take part in relatively accepted activities. Journalists describe Hamas's popularity as 'soaring as much for its reputation for opening schools and managing essential services such as water supplies as for resisting Israeli occupation' (Booth, 2006). Hamas is also 'perceived by many Palestinians as a grass-roots socialist movement capable of developing social welfare programs and delivering an honest, modest government and effective public services' (Jabr, 2006: 19–20). Nevertheless, Hamas's conservative approach to social issues does also raise questions in some quarters, such as the decision made by Hamas's council in Qalqilia to ban an international dance festival in summer 2007 to prevent social mixing between women and men.

Hamas not only provides job-training programmes for women, but also programmes that help women to gain both a religious and university education. Hamas does not prohibit women from working or from gaining an education. Many of Hamas's women members and supporters are professional doctors, lawyers, teachers and social workers (Cambanis, 2006). In fact, Hamas's programme for women encourages many female students to join the Hamas organization in the universities (Bullimore, 2006).

In its election agenda, Hamas addressed women's rights in education, work, inheritance and the right to take up decision-making positions. It emphasized women's roles in society as equal to men's roles. Jerusalem university professor Mariam Saleh, a Hamas candidate, said in a fiery speech: 'Women are more pivotal than men because women serve as doctors, scientists, holy warriors, and the heads of families whose men are in Israeli prisons' (Cambanis, 2006). However, some of those running for election did not necessarily advocate a women-centric agenda, such as Rasha Al-Rantissi, the widow of Abdelaziz Al-Rantissi, the Hamas leader assassinated by Israel in 2005: 'She is running on the basis of her husband's legacy. A women's agenda is not part of [Hamas's] discourse' (Al-Jazeera, 2006).

In their campaigns and rallies for the local council and municipal elections in 2004 and 2005 and the 2006 national elections, Islamist candidates insisted on armed struggle and emphasized that 'one hand builds, the other hand fights'. A veil covering their face, they believed that women should have equal rights in Palestinian society, especially the right to die in the armed struggle against Israel (Cambanis, 2006). Although the first female suicide attacks on Israel were undertaken by the secular Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade in 2002, Hamas deployed its first female suicide bomber only two years later.

Incidentally, for female suicide bombers, religion was a crucial, but not the only reason behind the phenomenon of martyrdom; there was also a



need to identify with a symbol of power and a thirst for revenge (El-Sarraj, 2001). Many female suicide bombers would have lived in refugee camps, especially in Gaza, and may have had a father, brother or husband killed in the Intifada or their family house demolished by Israeli soldiers. In all cases, the common elements were a sense of hopelessness, poverty, unemployment for both women and their male relatives and coming from a family of refugees with a strong sense of Palestinian identity.

### ISLAMIST WOMEN'S ATTITUDES AFTER THE 2006 ELECTIONS

Legislative Council member Miriam Farhat told reporters soon after she was elected, in January 2006, that women would have to cover their heads. Yet Hamas's candidate for prime minister, Ismail Haniyyeh, has been quick to deny this, saying that 'Hamas will not force women to wear the hijab or veil, but will seek to educate and persuade them about the virtues of Islam and Islamic behaviour' (Bullimore, 2006).

Huda Nae'em, one of the six Hamas women elected in January 2006, says 'Palestinian women are closer to the problems of society and this is why they are looking to Hamas for a solution'. According to Nae'em, women 'feel well treated by Hamas institutions. Now these women are looking to us, the women in parliament, to change other things' (Bullimore, 2006).

Independent Islamists like Majda Fadda, an elected member of the Nablus city council, are likely to serve as the intermediaries between the secular and religious female factions in the Palestinian government. The majority of women are Muslims but they are not affiliated with Hamas, they are not highly religious but nevertheless do not support the secular vision.

### SECULAR WOMEN'S REACTION AND ATTITUDES AFTER THE 2006 ELECTIONS

In the pre-elections for the Legislative Council in 2006, secular feminists were afraid that if Hamas won the elections, they would lose what they had achieved in the sphere of social life. Mona El-Farra from Gaza said: 'If Hamas is elected it would be disastrous for us, they will not bring stability, and socially they are not progressive' (BBC, 2006). She was not the only one who was worried; many other secular feminists shared her distress, because they did not want to be subjected to religious restrictions. For example, Bitar, who was running for the Palestinian legislature on a secular slate called 'The Third Way' and committed to a democratic system, said: 'I won't be happy in a system dominated by Hamas, but I have to

accept the results of the election. . . . But we don't want religion to dominate our life' (Cambanis, 2006).

Another woman, Abu Samaan, who supports the secular radical group the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, declared: 'I respect Hamas women candidates, I respect their ideology, but I don't want them to dictate things to me' ('Women a Striking Presence', 2006). While NGO worker Lama Hourani entirely rejected accepting Hamas in the government, saying: 'I do not agree with their political or social programmes. I am secular and do not believe in their way of struggle, and they depend on religious ideologies and not democracy' (BBC, 2006).

Finally, professor of women's studies Eileen Kuttub asserted: 'Hamas know that if they make us abide by Islamic tenets and not by secular ones, it won't be accepted and they stand to lose support.' She affirmed that the struggle of the women's movement will continue until the Palestinians decide on the model they are looking for – 'whether an Arab or an Islamic or a democratic state' (Rajalakshmi, 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Since the Oslo Accords, paucity of ideas and organizational paralysis have marked secular and left-wing Palestinian politics, as its leadership has lost the ability to mobilize people and solve their problems. They have not introduced an alternative vision for the new era. The peace process did not address the legitimate right to self-determination, the full establishment of a Palestinian state or the right of refugees to return. Frustration from the first Intifada and the failure of the Palestinian political leadership to achieve progress in the peace process has given rise to disillusionment among Palestinians. Additionally, it has caused them to turn away from an economic and social solution and to look instead to the spiritual life, expressing hope for a metaphysical power to offer a solution. This has predictably paved the road for the Islamic political groups to flourish and to become the most attractive alternative for Palestinians in general and for the majority population at the most vulnerable end of the economic spectrum, in particular.

It seems that the struggle within Islam itself is momentous if women are to achieve their rights. Haleh Afshar describes Islam as a potentially positive model for women's struggle, and she deconstructs religious textual reference to demonstrate a wealth of rights bestowed on women by the Qur'an in areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance, in opposition to the restrictive customs practised in Muslim societies (Afshar, 1984). One can hypothesize that it is reasonable to support the Muslim feminists' attempt to construct an alternative feminist agenda from within a reinterpreted Islamic framework (Rai and Lievesley, 1996), as this is possible if

women's perspectives are used to reinterpret the Qur'anic verses and Sunna. It is an appropriate interpretation for a society in which the majority of Muslim women are highly committed to Islam, and believe that Islam granted women the same rights as men (but that the patriarchal society has denied these rights).

It is in this sense that one can argue that Islamization and gender politics in Palestine are now closely intertwined, but I remain sceptical as to whether this will help women to gain – at least – the rights Islam has given them. However, I doubt that the new approach of reinterpreting the Qur'an will resolve all women's issues: it will, at best, be an interim solution. My suspicion is that in the long run its outcome will never give a woman her full rights to equal citizenship. Moghadam asserts that 'it is hard to defend as feminist the view that women can attain equal status only in the context of Islam. This is a fundamentalist view, not one compatible with feminism' (Moghadam, 2002: 1164).

On the other hand, I wonder whether the PNA will accept the integration of such a new interpretation into state legislation. If so, would Palestinian men accept this, not only in theory but also in practice? I believe that such legal change will be successful only if social change takes place, and women from Fatah and other secular parties must bridge a major cultural divide to cooperate in government and social services with the religious women from Hamas.

## NOTES

1. The 'Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements', the so-called Oslo Accords, were finalized in Oslo, Norway on 20 August 1993, and officially signed at a public ceremony in Washington, DC on 13 September 1993. It was the first direct, face-to-face agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. It was also a framework for the future relations between Israel and the anticipated Palestine state. The Accords provided for the creation of a Palestinian Authority (PNA). The Palestinian Authority had responsibility for the administration of the territory under its control. It also called for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from parts of the Gaza Strip and West Bank.
2. The separation wall, or segregation wall, erected by Israel is also referred to as the 'Apartheid Wall' by critics of Israeli policy. Construction of the Wall, including land confiscation and the uprooting of trees, began in June 2002, near the village of Salem, west of Jenin. On 10 July 2005, the Israeli cabinet approved the construction of the Wall in Jerusalem, due to be completed by September 2005. The Apartheid Wall is around 8 m high and probably 1000 km long. The Wall separates the Palestinians, and serves a purpose that goes way beyond any Israeli security needs. The Wall consolidates Israel's illegal settlements through the (once more) illegal confiscation of land. The Wall severs the ties of thousands of Palestinians from their homes, schools, families, towns, farms and water. Most of the Wall's route runs within the Palestinians' West Bank. As a result, the Wall along this part of the route

infringes the human rights of more than 210,000 Palestinians, living in 67 towns and villages. For more see: [www.passia.org/links-Wall.htm](http://www.passia.org/links-Wall.htm), <http://www.auphr.org/thewall>, [electronicintifada.net/bytopic/apartheid-wall.shtml](http://electronicintifada.net/bytopic/apartheid-wall.shtml).

3. In this document Palestinian women addressed the social inequalities they face; they also stressed the 'bitter experiences' that have 'made Palestinian women conscious of the specificity of women's issues which are linked to the struggle for justice, democracy, equality, and development' (GUPW, 1994: 197). The Charter demonstrates how closely the women's movement is tied to the nationalist movement: 'The efforts of Palestinian women as well as all democratic forces in Palestinian society must unite to remove all obstacles hindering the equality of women with men. We must work hand in hand towards a democratic society which fulfils a comprehensive national independence, social justice, and equality' (Sabbagh, 1996). The Charter essentially delineated gender equivalence and a secular vision of women's rights. In addition to political campaigning and strategies for getting women elected to governing bodies, the agenda included personal status laws. It included legislation to protect the rights of women and to guarantee equal access to opportunities, educational curricula sensitive to gender issues, health care and family planning services that give women control over their bodies and respect their rights to reproductive freedom and choice (Avgar, 1993). In their adoption of the UN CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), the women who drafted the Charter called for an end to discriminatory legislation against women, legal protection against family violence and restrictions of women's freedom and a woman's right to pass on citizenship to a husband and children.

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Fadwa Allabadi is assistant professor in gender studies and social development and director of INSAN Centre for Gender Studies at Al-Quds University, and a women's movement activist. She is Fulbright visiting scholar at the University of Michigan-Dearborn, US, and visiting scholar at York University in Canada. Her publications include 'Case History, *Diya between Shari'a and Customary Law*', pp. 164–75 in L. Welchman (ed.) *Women's Rights and Islamic Family Law: Perspectives on Reform* (New York: Zed Books, 2004) and 'The Making of *Fatawa: Mufties, Early Marriage and Islamic Law*', in *Review of Women's Studies* (BirZeit University, Palestine) (2004), Vol. 2. Address: Insan Centre for Gender and Women's Studies, Al-Quds University, Abudiss Law Building, P.O. Box 51000, East Jerusalem – Palestine. [email: fadwal@arts.alquds.edu]

